

A REVIEW OF E.M. FORSTER'S *A ROOM WITH A VIEW*

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ABSTRACT

Edward Morgan Forster was born in London on January 1, 1879. He was raised by his mother, Alice Clara Whichelo Forster, two paternal aunts and grandmother. His father, an architect by the name of Edmund Morgan, died of consumption in the year 1880. Forster's childhood was a happy one at Rooksnest, a "large, old, lonely but friendly house" (Edwards 180) in Hertfordshire that his mother rented. In 1890, Forster attended Kent House, a prep school in Eastbourne, but harassment led to his transfer to The Grange. His mother soon moved to Tonbridge in 1893 and Forster became a day boy at Tonbridge School, where he finished prep school. Marianne Thornton, a great-aunt, bequeathed Forster monetary independence. He used some of this money, beginning in 1897, to attend King's College, Cambridge and learned a great deal from "the informal social and intellectual intercourse of the university" (Edwards 180). However, he achieved an unsatisfactory second-class honors degree. Disappointed by his academic rank, Forster accepted his mother's plan to travel. In Italy, their stay in a pension at Florence inspired Forster to begin work, in 1902, on the *Lucy* novel, which eventually came to be known as *A Room with a View*. He is best known for five of his novels - *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905), *The Longest Journey* (1907), *A Room with a View* (1908), *Howards End* (1910), and *A Passage to India* (1924). Besides novels, Forster also wrote short stories, plays, film scripts, libretto, literary criticism, biographies, and travel guides.

KEYWORDS: Society, Conventions, Class Hierarchy, Tradition, Religion & Gender

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INTRODUCTION

Forster was a strong advocate of multiculturalism on account of his faith in personal relationships and his experiences as a globetrotter. Because he was neither a political conservative nor religious in a Christian sense" (Stone 5), his works are extremely impersonal in nature. His writings are filled with attempts to transgress the barriers of society, race, sex, and culture. Forster's third novel, *A Room with a View*, which he started in 1902 but did not publish until 1908, is a striking example of the same. It deals with a group of British characters who lived during the British Empire's zenith. The British were gaining power through their conquests in different parts of the world. It was also a time when the land began experiencing changes in all quarters of life, ranging from the questioning of traditional practices and belief systems to the demand for rights by women.

During Forster's time, "at the close of a long Victorian reign" (Edwards 186), the remnants of the sensibilities of the age still existed. On the social front, those belonging to the higher strata of society concerned themselves with issues of refinement and social conduct. The political arena also saw unprecedented changes with women clamouring for equal rights. Further, socialists were challenging the obsolete standards pertaining to class and religion. Art and literature also echoed this voice of change when artists and thinkers began to challenge the Victorian perceptions of love and sexuality.

The novel is a true reflection of contemporary life. During this age, travel was of great interest to the youth and it was not uncommon for the British to go to Italy “to learn about Italian art and culture” (Messenger 56). The idea behind such trips was to gain exposure to the work of Renaissance works of art, but many travelers returned with only a superficial experience of Italy. The British looked down on the Italians as a “most unpleasant people” (Forster 32) who had “no conception of the intellectual life” (Forster 32). All these aspects of Britishness are vividly portrayed by Forster in the novel.

A Room with a View is a semi-autobiographical novel as Forster draws parallels with his life in certain facets. At the time Forster wrote this book, he was at the beginning of his first relationship. This novel is dedicated to H.O. Meredith, Forster’s first love, whom he also considered “as an emancipator” (Furbank 97). Throughout the course of the novel, he focuses on the subject of repressed passion and the war between society’s conventions and individual desires of passion. His experiences as a gay had a great influence on the novel.

The novel is divided into two parts. Part one of the novel begins with Lucy Honeychurch, a young English woman vacationing with her cousin, Charlotte Bartlett, at an Italian pension for British guests. While complaining about the lack of views from their rooms, Lucy and Charlotte are interrupted by another guest, Mr. Emerson, who offers them an exchange of rooms. Mr. Emerson and his son, George, both have rooms which offer beautiful views. “The better class of tourist was shocked at this” (Forster 4). Charlotte, who is “greatly embarrassed by this unorthodox behaviour by social inferiors” (Messenger 53), refuses the offer as she thinks it would make her indebted to him. But the same evening, after the intervention of another guest, a clergyman named Mr. Arthur Beebe, they accept the offer. During the course of their stay in Florence, Lucy becomes close with the Emersons and begins to like them, unlike the other British guests at the pension. One day, Lucy witnesses a murder in Florence. George, who is present there, holds her when she faints. On their way home, they have an intimate conversation which stirs up feelings in Lucy. But she is not ready to face them and decides not to meet him again. Later that week, George and Lucy find themselves together in a carriage ride into the hills near Florence. The other travelers wander around the hills and Lucy finds herself alone. She stumbles on an earth terrace filled with violets and finds herself face-to-face with George. He kisses her, but the kiss is interrupted by Charlotte, who then “acts the outraged chaperon” (Messenger 54). The next day, Lucy and Charlotte leave for Rome.

Part Two of the novel occurs after the passage of several months. The setting has shifted from Florence in Italy to Windy Corner, Lucy’s house at Surrey in England. While in Rome, Lucy spent a great deal of time with Cecil Vyse, “a well-connected London aesthete” (Messenger 54). Cecil proposed to Lucy twice but she rejected him on both occasions. In this section of the novel, Cecil proposes to her yet again, and she finally accepts. Cecil’s true nature is revealed after their engagement. As a person belonging to the aristocracy in London, he “finds the cheerful domesticity of the Honeychurch household tiresome and irritating” (Messenger 54). He also dislikes Freddy, Lucy’s brother, and is not very fond of her mother either.

As the novel gradually develops, the Emersons move into Cissie Villa, not far from Windy Corner through Cecil who is “unaware of any past association between Lucy and George” (Messenger 54). Lucy is forced to face George Emerson again, but she manages to do so from a distance. Soon, Charlotte comes to stay as a guest at Windy Corner after her boiler is broken. During her stay, Freddy, who has befriended George, invites the latter to a game of tennis. Lucy is terrified at the thought of what might happen. On the same day, Cecil reads aloud from a British novel and Lucy soon realizes that the novel is written by Miss Eleanor Lavish, a woman who stayed at the same pension as her in Florence.

Cecil, who had refused to play tennis, reads a particularly humorous passage aloud, which is a nothing but a fictional recreation of her kiss with George. Lucy realizes that Charlotte told Miss Lavish, whom she regards as “her most intimate friend and confidante” (Martin 93), about her kiss with George, who is also present for when Cecil reads the passage. On their way back to the house, George, who is “excited by a literary rendition of his first kiss” (Messenger 54) finds Lucy alone in the garden and kisses her.

Lucy confronts Charlotte about her lack of discretion. She also orders George never to return to Windy Corner. George argues with her and tells her that Cecil, who “is for society and cultivated talk” (Forster 154), is unsuitable for her as he will stifle her. He goes on to tell her that he loves her for who she is. Lucy is greatly affected by his words, but she continues to stand firm. George is heartbroken and leaves. Later that night, Cecil, for the second time, refuses to play tennis with Freddy. This makes Lucy see him truly for the first time and she breaks off her engagement with him the same night.

Even after calling off her engagement with Cecil, Lucy still cannot muster courage to admit to anyone, including herself, that she loves George. This leads her to take the decision to “repress her feelings” (Messenger 54) and leave for Greece. Before she leaves, she goes to church with her mother and Charlotte, and comes across Mr. Emerson in the minister’s study. Mr. Emerson is not aware that Lucy has broken off the engagement. When she talks with him, Mr. Emerson realizes that she still feels deeply for George. He “gives her the courage to declare her love” (Messenger 54) and finally, she admits that she loves George.

The close of the novel shows George and Lucy on their honeymoon in Florence. Lucy eloped with George as she did not have her mother’s consent. Freddy, too, is upset with her. Though everything is not settled, she stills hopes that her family “will eventually forgive them” (Messenger 54).

The title of the novel, *A Room with a View*, has three ideas to itself. Firstly, it is the room with a view at the Pension Bertolini that is the central point around which the whole novel develops. It is here that the crux of the novel - the relationship between Lucy and the Emersons, begins. Secondly, the title is symbolic as it represents a life that is not bound by the rigid standards and dictates of society. It offers two alternatives to the readers. The first is that of giving in to the expectations of society and to suppress one’s individual choices, and live life in a room without a view. The other is to break free from the shackles of society and thus, find oneself in a room with a view - a view of the world and its reality. Thirdly, Forster uses the title to bring about the aspect of binary opposites by conceiving the idea of a ‘room’ being opposite to a ‘view’. A ‘room’ refers to a closed space, thereby hinting at “narrowness and confinement” (Prasad 78), while a ‘view’ stands for an open space, depicting “openness, liberalism, beautiful sights and freedom” (Prasad 78). The characters in the room are also compared to rooms and views. Forster himself is of the opinion that “men fall into two classes - those who forget views and those who remember them, even in small rooms” (Forster 148). Cecil tells Lucy, “I connect you with a view - a certain type of view. Why shouldn’t you connect me with a room” (Forster 99). His “conventionality traps him in the lifeless London environment as symbolized by a room with no view” (Wagner 280). Further, Charlotte, on arriving at Windy Corner asks for “an inferior spare room - something with no view” (Forster 132), which is representative of her conventional outlook. Mr. Emerson’s unorthodox nature is revealed when he says that “there is only one perfect view - the view of the sky straight over our heads ... all these views on earth are but bungled copies of it” (Forster 147). Forster uses the setting of the novel to imply the same idea. The first part of the novel is set in Italy, which symbolizes individuality and liberty, while the second part of the novel is set in the England, which is characterized by the superior stance given to society. To Lucy, it was Italy that “was offering her the most priceless of all possessions -

her own soul" (Forster 103), while England "would estrange her a little from all that she had loved" (Forster 113).

A Room with a View is a *bildungsroman* because the novel is about the coming-of-age of the female protagonist, Lucy, who is shown as being "excessively proper" (Trilling 98). She changes from her initial, timid self to being bold through her "search of the truth of passion and her own identity" (Prasad 36). Italy, where her "growth begins" (Messenger 55), presents her with "challenges to her conventional upbringing" (Messenger 55). Lucy's first trip to Florence, however, shows her timidity on many occasions. For instance, she apologizes for playing the piano as her music involves immense passion. Again, she flees to Rome after George kisses her. In both cases, Lucy is struck by the fear of being judged by society for her unconventional behaviour. However, in Surrey, she realizes that "her struggles are complicated and must be resolved" (Messenger 56). It is such a decision that leads her to embrace her passion when she breaks off her engagement with Cecil and marries George. Her "renunciation of George and her final acceptance of him" (Sullivan 220) is a clear indication of how she has grown and freed herself from the fetters of society.

Forster uses the characters of the novel as instruments to bring forth the various aspects that he deals with and the message that he wishes to convey. Lucy, a young woman from Surrey, who is "strongly influenced by duty and social convention" (Turk 429), is the female protagonist of the novel. Though she is initially "unsure of herself and more inclined to be swayed by the conventional attitudes of her class than by her own instincts and desires" (Martin 90), Forster depicts her as one who is determined to break free from the chains of society and its norms after she is "introduced to passion and spontaneity by George Emerson and his generous, free-spirited father" (Turk 429). This is evident when she calls off her engagement with Cecil as she "won't be stifled" (Forster 160), and chooses to marry George who is from the lower class. For Lucy, "independence was certainly her cue" (Forster 181), and she wants to seek this by "doing secretarial work, becoming a protesting suffragette, travelling widely, and not eating properly" (Forster 206).

George, the male protagonist, is a young man who yearns for the truth, and like his father, is "socially unorthodox" (Messenger 61). His father who does not believe in adhering to tradition and religious dictates has brought him up in a way that is "free from all the superstition and ignorance that lead men to hate one another in the name of God" (Forster 24). The fact that he belongs to the lower class does not hold him back from falling in love with Lucy. Unlike Cecil, he encourages Lucy to be an independent woman and tells her, "I want you to have your own thoughts even when I hold you in my arms" (Forster 155).

The character of Charlotte, Lucy's older cousin, is in stark contrast to that of the latter. She has "rejected life for convention" (Martin 91). When she accompanies Lucy to Italy, her role seems to be restricted to that of a chaperone as Mrs. Honeychurch paid for her trip - "a piece of generosity to which she made many a tactful allusion" (Forster 3). She is an archetype of those who uphold traditional values and notions. She is strongly against Lucy's closeness with the Emersons, thus reflecting the narrow frame of mind and snobbery of the upper class. Though she seems to be continually conniving against the happiness of everyone, it is she who acts as a catalyst in facilitating the marriage between Lucy and George.

Mr. Emerson, the father of George, offends the members of the upper class with his blatant honesty. He "is kind to people because he loves them; and they find him out, and are offended, or frightened" (Forster 23). He advocates liberal values and "secular views" (Messenger 53), and it is through him that Lucy finds the courage to free herself from the expectations of society and take the decision to marry George. Named after the transcendentalist philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, he is representative of the modernist idea of free thinking.

Cecil Vyse, Lucy's fiancé, is supercilious and despises Lucy's connections, on account of them being uncouth in comparison with the affluent society he belongs to. Though he is "regarded by most of the characters as a viable spouse for Lucy: of the right class, of the right intellect and personal caliber" (Edwards 79), he is not. He views Lucy "not as an autonomous human being with a life of her own but as a treasure to be protected" (Martin 98). "He had no glimpse of the comradeship after which the girl's soul yearned" (Forster 143). He is representative of the dominating male "who's kept Europe back for a thousand years" (Forster 154) by suppressing the female.

Mr. Beebe, the rector from Surrey, comes across as a tactful and pleasant man who uses his influence to help the other characters. He is "urbane and sociable" (Martin 92), and has an innate ability "to see good in everyone" (Forster 9). While everyone at the pension looks down on Mr. Emerson, he does not join them and tells Lucy and Charlotte that he offered them the rooms only because he did not value them, while they did. He supports Lucy all through, until she decides to marry George, when he opposes the alliance.

Mr. Cuthbert Eager, the British chaplain in Florence, is symbolic of those who belittle others and inflict pain on them. He has "a narrowly religious and ascetic personality" (Messenger 69), and stands for "propriety, false feelings, respectability, conspiracy and appearance" (Prasad 35). Being "morally rigid and judgmental" (Hinojosa 85), he spreads the false rumor that Mr. Emerson "murdered his wife in the sight of God" (Forster 50) because the latter did not baptize his son and thus, brought the wrath of God on his wife.

Miss Lavish is "an aging novelist of dubious talent" (Martin 93) who writes a novel based on life in Italy. She despises the English who travel abroad and claims that she alone knows Italy. Though she prides herself on being unorthodox, she is, in reality, just as snobbish as any other person belonging to the higher social class.

Mrs. Vyse, Cecil's mother, is a woman who is vain as her other upper class counterparts are. She "does not appreciate the rural lifestyle that bred Lucy" (Wagner 280), and takes a liking towards her only after the latter's trip to Italy as she "is purging off the Honeychurch taint ... She is not always quoting servants, or asking one how the pudding is made" (Forster 113). Her personal relationships, like most people of the upper class, "had been swamped by London ... and even with Cecil she was mechanical, and behaved as if he was not one son, but, so to speak a filial crowd" (Forster 113). This also hints at the post-modernist idea of isolation and alienation, following dehumanization.

Mrs. Honeychurch is part of the "middle-class snobs, who despised the vulgar" (Macauley 27). She is, however, "a warm-hearted woman whose love for her home and children is genuine and unstinting" (Martin 99). When Lucy and Cecil were engaged, "she wanted to show people that her daughter was marrying a presentable man" (Forster 90). She is also an upholder of tradition and religion, and "defended orthodoxy" (Forster 139). It was precisely this loyalty that makes her forbid Lucy and Cecil "to hate any more clergymen" (Forster 93).

The character of Freddy, Lucy's younger brother, is in close resemblance with that of Lucy herself, as the two do not believe in adhering to tradition merely because it is handed down over the generations. He is not fond of Cecil who is egotistical and hard to talk to, but strikes up "an immediate friendship" (Messenger 54) with George who is selfless and easily relatable on account of their similar natures. His dislike for Cecil is evident when he tells his sister, "I represent all that he despises" (Forster 84), thus also showing the stark contrasts in their thoughts and interests.

Sir Harry Otway is yet another character in the novel through whom the trivial nature of the upper class becomes evident when he does not want to rent out his villas to anyone belonging to the lower class. He purchases two villas, Cissie

and Albert, and lets the Emersons occupy one. His snobbishness is further seen when he thinks that the improvement of the train service “will attract the wrong type of people” to come over and rent his villas (Forster 96).

Catharine Alan and Teresa Alan, also referred to as the Miss Alans, are mild-mannered but adventurous, something that was unconventional in the contemporary English society. This independent way of life is what prompted Cecil to say that “they were a highly unsuitable addition to the neighbourhood” (Forster 97).

Forster also concerns himself with various themes that are relevant not only to the time when he wrote the novel, but also till date. The theme of society, class, and wealth are found throughout the novel. Together, they serve as the reason behind a majority of the events in the text. The scene in the novel that best shows Forster’s idea of the meaningless of the roles that society assigns to its individual members is that which takes place at the Sacred Lake. George, Freddy, and Mr. Beebe leave their clothes on the banks of the lake and get into the water. After they bathe, Freddy wears Mr. Beebe’s clerical waistcoat and George puts on Mr. Beebe’s hat. It is precisely these actions which show that the roles which individuals assume under the pressures and expectations of society are merely a facade. Charlotte playing the role of a chaperone has its roots in the idea of wealth. Like her mother, Lucy too, takes pity on Charlotte and says, “It is so dreadful for Charlotte, being poor” (Forster 9). Further, the discrimination on the grounds of wealth is seen when Sir Harry says of his villas, “It is too large for the peasant class, and too small for anyone the least like ourselves” (Forster 96).

The breaking away from tradition is another significant theme which Forster intertwines with that of society, class, and wealth. During the Edwardian era, the conservative practices of the Victorian age began to give way to a more liberal line of thought - a change which Forster advocated. This is best seen through the character of Lucy who attempted to break free from tradition and the rigidity associated with it. It is the “convention in Lucy’s soul that keeps her from directly experiencing life” (Martin 94). She realizes that “she must break free of this conventionality” (Wagner 276). Forster shows her revolting nature as being present, even if dormant, when in Florence, she finds Charlotte’s hug as giving her “the sensation of a fog” (Forster 12) as her cousin safeguards tradition. To Charlotte, society was a circle where “one thought, married, and died” (Forster 102), but Lucy felt that her “true self can be found only in complete freedom from the reins of others” (Hinojosa 77).

The inferior position of women during the time is seen through the character of Lucy. Forster is of the opinion that women are different, and not inferior to men. Traditionally, they are thought to be a means of achieving the ends of success by their male counterparts, “to inspire others to achievement rather than to achieve themselves” (Forster 37). But Lucy is not the “medieval lady” (Forster 37). She is a rebel at heart who longed for independence and “desired more” (Forster 38). The character of Mrs. Honeychurch, at a certain level, is symbolic of those women who play a part in subjugating their own sex. This idea is reinforced when she renders the art of writing as a male prerogative and says, “If books must be written, let them be written by men” (Forster 128).

Love is another theme that Forster greatly focuses on in the novel. It was the trip to Italy that ignited the spark of love which is “eternal” (Forster 189) in Lucy and she “learned what it is to love: the greatest lesson ... that our earthly life provides” (Forster 88). Though tradition makes the event of an engagement a “public property” (Forster 90) and celebrates it “because it promised the continuance of life on earth” (Forster 91), to Lucy, “it promised something quite different - personal love” (Forster 91). Forster, thus, throws light on the difference between true love and that which is only a mask one wears to pacify society.

Travel and the influence it has on man are seen to a large extent in the novel. When Miss Lavish says that "One doesn't come to Italy for niceness ... one comes for life" (Forster 16), she hints at the elevating effect it has on those who visit the place. It is the trip to Italy that changes Lucy from the timid person she was to the present, resolute one. On the other hand, "Italy had quickened Cecil, not to tolerance, but to irritation" (Forster 103). He cannot bring himself to accept that Italy represents the ideal society. It is after this trip that he understands Lucy's true nature as that of being "a rebel who desired not a wider dwelling-room, but equality beside the man she loved" (Forster 103). This only adds to his discomfort as he cannot see Lucy as his equal and expects her to live under his control.

Forster also satirizes religion on many occasions in the novel. Firstly, he shows the hypocrisy of the clergy through the words of Lucy when she talks of Mr. Beebe as being different from other members of the clergy, "He seems to see good in everyone. No one would take him for a clergyman" (Forster 9). Secondly, when Miss Lavish and Lucy are out in Florence and a child falls on the street in front of the church, it is a lay woman and not the clergy who helps the child up. Forster voices his opinion of the church through Mr. Emerson who thinks that the woman has "done more than all the relics in the world" (Forster 20). Further, he mocks religious beliefs that he considers baseless, through the character of George who says "I would rather go up to heaven by myself than be pushed by cherubs" (Forster 22). All this strengthens the idea that "religion - was fading like all the other things" (Forster 183).

The aspect of modernity and industrialization in relation to nature is also dealt with in the novel. When Cecil, who "likes to animadvert upon Nature" (Ebbatson 216) contemplates on how all life in the countryside has a "tacit sympathy with the workings of Nature which is denied to us of the town" (Forster 93), he brings forth the effect that science and technological advances have on both nature and man. It is the experience of life in the town that awakens in us the realization that "birds and trees and the sky are the most wonderful things in life, and that the people who live amongst them must be the best" (Forster 93). Forster, through the character of Mr. Emerson says, "I believe that we must discover Nature" (Forster 117), thereby stressing on the need for a proximity between man and nature.

Forster's *A Room with a View*, proves to be both a valuable account of the times, as well as "a rare literary document" (Fillion 266) wherein he blends the old and the new with great expertise. The novel explores the "difficulty of being true to oneself and to others in a precarious world" (Martin 108). It gives vivid descriptions of the "meaning of life" (Crews 7), and of the clash between the opposites of tradition and modernity, the male and the female, restraints and freedom, all of which are characteristic of the age. Though he portrays British life, he caters to the needs of readers across nations by discussing issues that are essentially global in nature, and this adds to the success of the novel.

CONCLUSIONS

A Room with a View illustrates all that the age witnessed in terms of the transition from the rigid Victorian society to the liberal twentieth century, and the inevitable clash between the ways of the past and the trends of the present. The tracing of the growth of the characters further pertains to the responses of individuals to these changes and their rebellion against the dictates of society. Such a projection of circumstances and events is suggestive of the popularity of the work and also accounts for its relevance till date. The social transformations and the difficulties that accompany them which are pictured in the novel resound with those of every age.

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